

## The Bradford sisters

A ship captain, an abolitionist mother and four women who forged  
a path for the future

By Mary McKenzie  
Clipper reporter

The story of Captain Gershom Bradford (1774-1844) is one that is in many ways synonymous with Duxbury's history.

A descendent of Mayflower Pilgrim William Bradford, Gershom was a young man raised in Duxbury and working on a ship by the age of 17. Bradford became a ship captain in an era when much of Duxbury's economy centered around the sea – building ships, using ships for trade and delivery of goods. It is a job that brought him all over the world.

He was held captive by the French during the Napoleonic Wars in 1807 while trading in Europe. While he was in jail across the ocean, his wife Sarah "Sally" Hickling Bradford supervised the early stages of construction for the house we know today on Tremont Street had two daughters at the time. In 1826, the captain decided to remain on land and became

Duxbury's tax collector. He later served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He was an active member of the Temperance Society, the Anti-Slavery Society and First Parish Church, according to Duxbury Rural and Historical Society historian Carolyn Ravenscroft.

Gershom Bradford died in 1844 at the age of 70 while delivering a basket of corn to Mrs. Weston (possibly Deborah Brownell Weston, the wife of his nephew Gershom Bradford Weston).

His home is owned by the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society and is operated as a museum. Currently, DRHS is holding a "Re-Imagining Bradford" campaign to raise funds for renovations to the Bradford House. The efforts center around the Bradford women. While much of history is about men, because women were limited in the jobs they could take, the roles in society



Clockwise from top left: Charlotte Bradford, who worked as a Civil War nurse, Maria Bradford with husband Claudius Bradford, the only now Bradford sister who married (and to her third cousin!) and Lucia They Bradford, who was an amateur botanist and poet.

Photos courtesy Duxbury Rural and Historical Society



they could have and the education they could obtain, the history of the Bradfords lie in stark contrast to that.

The Captain and his wife Sarah “Sally” and their four daughters, all raised in the Federal-era home within walking distance to Town Hall and First Parish Church, are a family deeply connected to American history – from the anti-slavery (abolitionist) movement, the temperance movement, as well as social changes – including alternative medicine and vegetarianism.

When the Civil War broke out, two of these four Bradford sisters stepped up and worked as nurses to help wounded and sick soldiers.

The Bradford daughters may have gotten a lot of their independent minds from their parents, who embraced the anti-slavery movement when it was largely unpopular to do so. The captain was an avowed abolitionist and Sally Bradford, who died in 1861, was recognized following her death in the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, “as a very old friend of the antislavery cause.” Ravenscroft said that the Bradfords spent a lot of time raising money for the cause and petitioned state and federal government to end slavery.

Abolitionist leaders visiting the area stayed at their home, including Charles Lenox Remond, Abby Kelley Foster and Charles Burleigh.

This forward thinking from a female perspective is one of the reasons for “Re-Imagining Bradford” campaign, said Ravenscroft.

The other reason is that DRHS hopes to display the many documents and items of the Bradford family throughout the house, which was first donated to the society in 1968, “in a way that is appealing for many years to come,” said Ravenscroft.

“Unlike many house museums where items would need to be brought in to be representative from that era, we do not need to do so with the Bradfords, who were in that house 160 years and have items from various generations all over the home,” Ravenscroft explained. “What we want to do is showcase this wealth of information and history.”

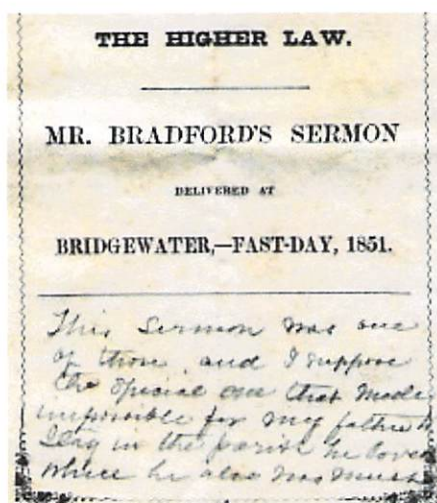
As such, DRHS is actively raising funds for an estimated \$655,000 needed to complete repairs and renovations. So far, the Society has raised \$250,000, which has been used for architectural assessment, paint analysis, planning materials and for architectural examination.

### **The Bradford Women**

The Bradford sisters had a brother, baby Gershom, who died at two weeks of age. They also were raised with their two orphaned cousins, William and Edward Ellison, said Ravenscroft.

Born in 1804, Maria was the eldest of the Bradford daughters. She became an educator and was the only Bradford sister who married. She married in 1830 at the age of 26 and was an abolitionist with her husband (and third cousin), Rev. Claudius Bradford. She left her Duxbury home after she and Claudius married and the couple moved several times. After Claudius passed away in 1863, Maria returned home to Duxbury but died while visiting one of her children in Washington DC in 1864. Claudius and Maria’s children inherited the property in 1893.

Claudius was a teacher, and later a principal, but in 1840 he became a Unitarian minister. In 1851, as a minister,



The sermon against slavery that cost Claudius Bradford his job as a minister.

Images courtesy DRHS



Claudius gave a sermon against slavery called "Higher Law," which cost him his job in Bridgewater, where the entire congregation turned their back on him, indicating they no longer wanted him to be their minister.

"At the time, Bridgewater had three large cotton gin factories and the citizens were well aware that their livelihoods depended on the peculiar institution," a DRHS summary states. The DRHS found information on Maria's life from *The Liberator*, antislavery materials, family letters and a diary.

The youngest of the four girls, Charlotte Bradford (born 1813), started out as a teacher, then worked as a Civil War nurse for three years, returning for tour after tour. Charlotte worked on hospital ship with sick and wounded soldiers, then in various hospitals in Washington, DC, then as matron in the Home for Soldiers – which Ravenscroft explained was a type of halfway house for soldiers returning from war and on their way home. Charlotte then headed up a Home for Wives and Mothers (of soldiers), many of whom went to Washington, DC to look for their husbands and sons and get them back home.

"Like the soldiers, these women may have run out of money and gotten a little lost in the system," said Ravenscroft. "They may have been unable to find their son or husband, may have been pregnant – Charlotte attended several births at this home – or just needed a rest. Many came with children and needed a safe place."

While working as a nurse, Charlotte was fired for incompetence after having an argument with a doctor. Ravenscroft noted that it was common at the time for medical professionals to be dismissive of nursing staff, who were not trained in college until years later.

"Nursing was not looked upon as a desirable profession at the time," Ravenscroft said. "She was referred as 'that woman,' or called by 'woman,' often because she was the only woman nearby." But her firing did not end Charlotte's career. Her mentor and the head of Army nurses, Dorothea Dix, quickly moved Charlotte to a different hospital.

One of the middle sisters, Lucia Alden Bradford (1807- 1893), also worked as a Civil War nurse. She was an amateur botanist and wrote poetry and drew. She was also a member of the Temperance society.

Sister Elizabeth, (1809- 1890) was also actively involved in the Temperance movement, which was an attempt to make alcohol consumption illegal. In that movement, Elizabeth became treasurer of the local chapter of the Martha Washington Society.

Elizabeth and Lucia were interested in alternative medicines, as much of the medicine of the time involved alcohol and drugs. Ravenscroft said it is possible that the two women's interest in sobriety fueled their interest in alternative medicines.

"In many ways, this is a fascinating family," said Ravenscroft. "And it has been so well documented, which is wonderful for us."

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